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## **Guest Opinion: Senate Bill 337 Unfair to Tribes, Wild Bison**

**By ROBERT MAGNAN**

In 2005, about 100 wild Yellowstone bison that roamed out of the Park were spared from slaughter and placed in a brucellosis experiment. The goal was to provide a source of disease-free Yellowstone bison and make them available to start new herds elsewhere. Four years later, they are ready for relocation to willing qualified landowners.

Montana Senate Bill 337 would prevent Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks from relocating these Yellowstone bison to any place in Montana other than the National Bison Range in Moiese. The bill's sponsor, Senator Brenden, R-Scobey, made his intent clear to the Senate Agriculture committee: prevent bison relocation to Fort Peck Indian Reservation.

Senate Bill 337 is not about brucellosis; to say it is defies science. No cattle have ever gone through the amount of testing for disease as have these Yellowstone bison, and if these bison aren't good enough then neither are any of the livestock in this state. Rather, SB 337 is about a continuing disrespect for our tribes and for wild bison.

We as Native peoples are trying to help ourselves and help America preserve a rare and vital resource – genetically pure wild bison – by restoring a small herd to a small part of our tribal lands. Yet it seems that every step of the way we get blocked by someone utilizing misinformation and scare tactics to prevent our progress.

Here are our plans for all to see: we will improve the fence around the pasture selected using the latest wildlife-friendly standards developed by state and federal agencies (to keep bison in while allowing antelope to go under and deer or elk to jump over). We will then allow the bison to grow over 5 years to about 150, well below the pasture's carrying capacity. We will then harvest some at a sustainable level each year to provide food and products for our poor, our elderly, our traditionalists, and our people with diabetes.

The bison relocation program is part of a solution that has been hammered out by the involved and responsible parties based on the best science and knowledge available. It has been put under a lot of scrutiny. Many safeguards are in place. We will participate in continued brucellosis testing over the next five years. The bison will be considered a "research herd" by APHIS, and will not affect Montana's brucellosis status. It is time to move forward.

The Senate passed SB 337 by a vote of 31 to 19. It now goes to the House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee on March 19 at 3 pm. As a bill that discriminates against us and attempts to end our efforts to help ourselves, we hope it stops there. We invite those in Montana's legislature who support SB 337 to lend a hand rather than use your votes to squelch our hopes. Come out and help us build a fence and celebrate the next step in bison conservation and in our tribes' progress.

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